

## EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN WHO ARE DEAFBLIND

- **FACT 1: There is a critical need to identify children who are deafblind as early as possible.**

**Who are these children?** The federal definition: "Deafblindness means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which creates such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness." (1999 IDEA Rules and Regulations 300.7(c)(2)) Children who are deafblind have a combined hearing and visual impairment. This does not mean that all Deafblind children are profoundly deaf and totally blind - in fact, most of these children can see and hear to some extent. This definition also includes children who have had damage to the visual and hearing areas of the brain and function as though they are deafblind. Some of these children may have degenerative disorders that will eventually affect both vision and hearing.

**A Single Disability....**Deafblindness does not mean deafness + blindness, but is considered a single disability. Did you know that 90% of what we learn is via vision + hearing, our two "distance" senses? In order to learn with our other senses, we need direct contact (touch, smell, taste). For children who are deafblind, this combination of disabilities truly limits their ability to learn and to communicate.

**Other issues....**The majority of children who are deafblind have additional disabilities and are classified as "cognitively delayed" or "multi-disabled." There are also infants and toddlers who have diagnosed conditions that put them "at risk" for being deafblind. Since the majority of children who are deafblind have additional disabilities, the impact of the combined sensory challenges is often overlooked or minimized. Despite the challenges that multiple disabilities present to a child, opportunities for communication and learning are a vital to the quality of the child's life.

**How does early identification help?** When a child is identified with deafblindness at a young age, there is still capacity for brain development - brain development that is crucial to effective use of their residual senses (including residual vision and hearing), and in learning how to communicate. In addition, once a child has been identified with the condition of deafblindness, there are a variety of programs that can support the child's learning.

**Is early identification enough?** No! These children need to be referred for specialized programming. We know that programs and persons that serve one of the disabilities (hearing loss or vision loss) can not effectively impact a deafblind child. The combined vision and hearing issues need to be considered and addressed by programs and/or educational staff that understand the impact of a dual sensory loss.

- **FACT 2: There are specialized programs available.**

*There are two statewide outreach programs in Wisconsin that understand the unique needs of children with dual sensory loss / deafblindness and can support the child's educational needs. These programs offer services for children and youth of all ages who are Deafblind and their families and provide training and technical assistance to the educational teams working with these children. Development of the child's communication ability and optimizing the child's learning potential is the main emphasis of the two Wisconsin Outreach programs: Wisconsin Educational Services Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (WESPDHH) and Wisconsin Deafblind Education (WDE).*

- **FACT 3: You can help!**

*It continues to be a challenge, however, to identify these children at a young age. As a medical provider, you play a key role in helping us to find these children earlier. If you are working with a child with any combination of hearing and vision loss, or you suspect a combined hearing and vision loss, please refer that child for specialized services!*

### **Refer any child and family whom you suspect is "Deafblind" to:**

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